

# Yasuo Kuniyoshi



The works in this exhibition were selected by Susan Lubowsky, Branch Director, Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris.

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#### A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

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# Yasuo Kuniyoshi

Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

April 11–June 19, 1986

# Yasuo Kuniyoshi

1889-1953



*Weather Vane and Sofa*, 1933

Oil on canvas, 35¼ x 60⅞

The Santa Barbara Museum of Art, California;

Gift of Wright S. Ludington

Yasuo Kuniyoshi's art was a unique blend of the oriental and the occidental. Born in Okayama, Japan, in 1889, in humble circumstances, he grew up there as a strong, active, and adventurous boy. When almost seventeen he came to America, the land of opportunity, with little money, no American friends, only a few words of English, and no plan to be an artist. For four years on the West Coast he worked at hard, poorly paid jobs; but in 1907 a teacher in Los Angeles recognized his gift for drawing, and he began to study art at night. In 1910 he moved to New York, for six more years of hardship and loneliness. Finally, in 1916, he found his most influential teacher in Kenneth Hayes Miller at the Art Students League, and permanent friends among the students. (As his classmate under Miller, I first met him that year.) In 1919 he married Katherine Schmidt, also a Miller student. They had to make their living by non-artistic jobs: he as a photographer of works of art, she by running the League lunchroom. But their summers were their own, spent painting in Ogunquit, Maine.

Kuniyoshi's first works after he left the League in 1920 were a combination of his Japanese heritage, naiveté, and a strongly individual character. Mostly outdoor subjects, they showed a fascination with all kinds of living things: people, animals, birds, insects, snakes, flowers, weeds—pictured in free dreamlike combinations. Cows kept on appearing; Kuniyoshi explained later that he was born in the Japanese Year of the Cow, and the cow was “decorative as well as ugly. The horse is a splendid animal, but the cow is irregular.” Young women, nude or in bathing suits, also appeared—an attraction to the female that proved to be lifelong. There was no attempt at naturalism: his concentration was on the figures and objects in themselves, not on their visual appearance. Occidental perspective was ignored: the landscape, instead of being horizontal, often rose in an almost vertical plane, as though one were looking down on it. The color was chiefly earth tones: ocher, sienna, Indian red, without cooler tones. Black and gray were used with stunning effect. In a series of ink drawings, his fantastic imagery found even purer expression, with an exquisite precision, down to the finest details. These early drawings remain among his most original works in any medium. Along with his first paintings, they represent entirely personal creations, without discernible

influences from European or American modernism; but they were compatible with modernism, which in one aspect was a rejection of the naturalism of Western art. Kuniyoshi, however, was never to attempt abstraction: for him actualities always remained essential.

By 1925 the Kuniyoshis, from a few sales and their extra work, had saved enough money for their first visit to Europe, for ten months, first in Paris and Italy, then in the south of France. Three years later a second visit, spent mostly in Paris, brought Kuniyoshi into closer contact with Parisian modernists, particularly the gifted cosmopolite Jules Pascin, sensual and tragic, whom he had already known in New York, and who had a magnetic influence on all who knew him. "I was impressed by French contemporaries," Kuniyoshi wrote later. "especially for their keen understanding of their medium. . . . Almost everybody on the other side was painting directly from the object, something I hadn't done all these years. . . . I had painted almost entirely from imagination and my memories of the past." The result was to bring him back to the model and the object, and to a more naturalistic style.

His chief subjects of the 1930s were women, still lifes, and landscapes. His single figures of girls in various stages of undress, with their voluptuous impassive faces, their air of waiting and pensiveness, were embodiments of sexual magnetism. A series of lithographs pictured circus performers and acrobats, always female. His still lifes were assemblages of seemingly incongruous objects—a vase, a crumpled newspaper, a handful of cigars, a photograph of a Titian—put together in apparent disorder, piled one on top of another, some of them upside-down, building fantastic structures. Expressing his delight in the physical properties of everyday objects, they also gave a haunting sense of meanings beyond the things themselves. In these still lifes his earlier fantasy lived on.

His style, though naturalistic, was free from photographic illusionism and appearance-painting; it was fundamentally plastic and sensuous. Forms were rounder, situated in deeper three-dimensional space. He still tended to represent things as if seen from above; floors slanted upward, table tops were tilted forward, giving full value to their forms. Color, though still on the earthy side, was wider in range, adding cooler tones he had not used before. His handling



*Waitresses from Sparhawk*, 1924  
Oil on canvas, 29¾ x 41½  
Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery,  
The University of Texas at Austin;  
James and Mari Michener Collection

of paint continued to display the intense pleasure that, from his beginnings as a painter, he took in pigment and its manipulation. His art remained a deeply physical one, a product of sensual vitality.

From the late 1920s on, Kuniyoshi's artistic reputation grew steadily. His first one-man exhibition, in 1922 at the Daniel Gallery, was followed by annual shows there, and later at the Downtown Gallery. From 1930 on, he was included regularly in the big annuals of American art throughout the country, and received a succession of awards. In 1933 he began teaching at his old school, the Art Students League, becoming one of its most popular teachers. He had been an early member of the Whitney Studio Club, which showed his work frequently, and bought it, as did the Club's successor, the Whitney Museum. In 1948 the Museum changed its policy against one-man shows of living artists, and gave him its first one-man retrospective. In the late 1920s the Kuniyoshis had begun spending summers in the artists' colony of Woodstock, New York, and in 1929 they built a house there. After he and Katherine Schmidt were divorced in 1932, and he married Sara Mazo in 1935, Woodstock remained a second home, where they had many artist friends.

His early hardships had made Kuniyoshi especially aware of the social and economic problems of artists, and he joined liberal artists' organizations. At first apt to let others do the talking, in the mid-1930s he began to play a more active role. When the American Artists' Congress was launched in 1936 he was on its national executive committee, and later was elected one of its five vice-presidents. He spoke publicly for artists' rights and the necessity of organization. These activities meant much to him as a man and an artist, helping to make him feel at home in his adopted country. When Artists Equity, the first nationwide association based on common economic interests, was founded in 1947, he was elected its first president and served for four years—a remarkable testimony of his fellow artists' regard for him. He proved to be a very good executive, hardworking and diplomatic.

During the Depression and its aftermath, when the social protest school was in the ascendant, Kuniyoshi had produced little art that had overt social content; its content had been personal and amoral. But in the late 1930s his work began to show a growing concern



*Self-Portrait as a Golf Player, 1927*

Oil on canvas, 50¼ x 40¼

The Museum of Modern Art, New York:

Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund

with the state of the world. The effect on him of World War II was direct and immediate. Japanese-born, he could not be a United States citizen, but he had long felt himself an American. From the time of Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931 he had been opposed to the Japanese government, and he made no secret of his opinions. After Pearl Harbor, only his known liberalism and the support of his friends saved him from the restrictions imposed on many Japanese-Americans. In the professional art world his position was unaffected. Publicly he could have remained silent about the war and no one could have blamed him, but he did not hesitate to speak out. He drew posters for the Office of War Information, among the most telling produced by it; and he volunteered to broadcast to Japan, insisting on using his own name.

"The war for the past few years has been the backdrop for a great number of my works," he wrote in 1947. "Not necessarily the battlefield, but war's implications: destruction, lifelessness, hovering between life and death, loneliness." These concerns brought about basic changes in the content of his work. The simple sensuousness of the 1930s was replaced by broader interests. His art no longer concentrated on the single female figure, indoors, and on still life. Women still played leading parts, but not primarily as sex objects; they became actors in pictorial dramas symbolizing the state of the postwar world. The pleasure principle that had ruled his work of the 1930s gave way to the realization that festivities were over. Playgrounds were shown in ruins, merry-go-round horses were broken, abandoned. His art of these years, he said, had "implications of very sad things."

At the same time, this broadening in content was accompanied by remarkable developments in Kuniyoshi's art. His compositions now incorporated more elements: the figure, landscape, cityscape, even still life. Design took on a new complexity and richness, with large, bold forms balanced by fine, delicate ones. The integrity of the picture plane was preserved, yet purely decorative values were enhanced. His color range expanded to include brilliant hues of blue, violet, vermilion, orange, and yellow that were new in his gamut. The general tonality was high-keyed and more luminous, with a translucency like that of fresco; at this time he was much interested in Italian fresco painting of the early Renaissance.

In Kuniyoshi's last five years, from 1948 until his death in 1953, his postwar preoccupation with ruins and desolation gave way to a reappearance of the carnival spirit—clowns, jugglers, circus performers—but with a different undertone. The imagery of these last works was never obvious: as with much imaginative art, there was an element of ambiguity. His clowns were masked, their faces were seldom revealed; but even the masks were not happy ones. The sense of unknown presences behind the masquerade gave these scenes the quality of ominous dreams. His color flowered into a new high-pitched intensity. These final paintings, with their gaiety and their irony, were his culminating imaginative achievements. His art had come full circle, from naive fantasy, through naturalism, back to fantasy.

LLOYD GOODRICH

*Director Emeritus*

Whitney Museum of American Art

## East to West\*



*Circus Girl Resting*, 1925  
Oil on canvas, 39½ x 28¾  
Auburn University Collection, Alabama

The strength and originality of Yasuo Kuniyoshi's work lies in his successful fusion of three discrete traditions—early American folk art, European modernism, and traditional Japanese painting. The flattened perspective and formulaic compositions of the Japanese and the American primitives were the most easily comprehensible to Kuniyoshi as a young artist. "My tendency was two-dimensional, my inheritance was shape painting, like kakemonos [pictures on silk or paper]. A landscape—rocks, wide places—one thing right above another. Further things above near things. Everything painted in [a] two-dimensional way." The images of spare landscapes, children, casually attired women, and circus themes that dominate Kuniyoshi's earliest work would reemerge throughout his career even as his style evolved: from the naive works of the 1920s toward naturalism in the 1930s and, ultimately, nearly abstract compositions in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

When the 1913 Armory Show in New York City introduced European modernism to America, Kuniyoshi was working in a Syracuse hotel. By the next year, he enrolled in the Independent School in New York, and found "everybody was talking about the Armory Show" and that "Cubism was in the air." He remembers being "caught up in all the excitement without really understanding what it was all about." In fact, his early work was heavily influenced by Japanese art and early American antiques, which he had begun to collect under the tutelage of his friend and benefactor, Hamilton Easter Field.

*The Fall of Man (Adam and Eve)* (1922) is an amalgam of the individual elements that characterized Kuniyoshi's paintings of the 1920s. The dreamy, childlike approach noted in contemporary reviews is apparent here in the flora and fauna that appear throughout the scene. Although Kuniyoshi's naive technique gives a playful character to the leafy plants, the frog, bird, fish, snake, grasshopper, and the cow who has just deposited a flop, the artist was astonished at the critics' assumption that he was being humorous. "I wasn't trying to be funny, but everyone thought I was, I was painting cows at the time because somehow I felt very near to the cow." The painting is divided in half with Adam submerged in a dark womblike pool on the left, and Eve posed against a thrusting rock form on the right. The work appears to focus on the playful



*Oriental Presents*. 1951 Oil on canvas, 30 x 50 Private collection

juxtaposition of male/female symbolism rather than on a sober representation of the biblical story. Painted in Ogunquit, Maine, where the Kuniyoshis summered with Field, the rocky landscape has more in common with Ogunquit than with the traditionally lush garden of Eden. “Up to about 1930 I used to go to Maine and that severe landscape and simple New England buildings were my God. Whenever I did anything, I used to make up that type of scenery somewhere in the picture.” The same terrain appears again in *Landscape* and *Waitresses from Sparhawk*, both painted in 1924. The waitresses’ arms—smooth, curvilinear, and linked in conversation—are a counterpoint to the flat buildings and jagged rocks of the background. Like Eve, their round bodies end in tiny pointed feet, a motif common to both Japanese and American primitive depictions of women.

The 1923 paintings *Child* and *Boy Stealing Fruit* reflect Kuniyoshi’s affinity with the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century itinerant portrait painters known as limners. Both recall the lim-



*I'm Tired*, 1938

Oil on canvas, 40¼ x 31

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York:

Purchase 39.12

ners’ formulaic backgrounds and employ similar props—the flowered hat, draped curtain, forward-tilted tabletop still life, and even the New England landscape seen through a window in *Boy Stealing Fruit*. The children stare through large, almond-shaped eyes, a feature found in colonial portraiture as well as in oriental portraiture. Though *Child* is static, and conforms to the rigid strictures of pose typical of its predecessors in folk painting, *Boy Stealing Fruit* reflects the more indulgent morality of the twentieth century by immortalizing a naughty child caught in the act of theft.

*Circus Girl Resting* proved to be Kuniyoshi’s most infamous and controversial painting, albeit for political rather than aesthetic reasons. Executed after the artist’s first trip to Europe in 1925, the figure of the girl represents a modernist approach to portraiture while retaining many of the stylized devices of the limners. Rounder and more imposing than his earlier women, and loosely clad in a slip and stockings, she is very much a sensual creature of substance. *Circus Girl Resting* was purchased by the U.S. State Department in 1946 for its international exhibition. “Advancing American Art,” organized to foster good will through cultural exchange. Instead, the painting became the focus of conservative outrage, primarily because of the figure’s large scale and its dominance of the canvas. Critics saw the espousal of Communist ideals and the immorality of modern art in the works chosen for the tour, especially in this “typical American girl . . . better equipped to move a piano than play one,” and “that fancy number of the sliding Billy Watson Beef Trust gal leaning sweatily as she parks her beefy haunches.” *Look* magazine’s reactionary exposé, “Your Money Bought These Paintings,” featured Kuniyoshi’s work in an article entitled “Is This Art?” and the liberal *New York Post* singled out *Circus Girl Resting*, inviting their readers to write Congress in protest about the painting’s inclusion in the show. The outcry caused many of the works in the exhibition to be withdrawn; ultimately, the tour itself was canceled.

Kuniyoshi’s second trip to Paris in 1928 had a marked influence on his development. Although he continued to portray women, landscapes and still lifes, he no longer painted solely from memory and imagination. His imagery became more naturalistic, his brushwork looser. Kuniyoshi’s conscious attempts to reconcile Eastern and

Western aesthetic philosophies resulted in a more sophisticated approach to his subject matter. “The [Eastern] tendency,” he explained, “is toward the spiritual side, while Western art seems to me based on content and forms derived by intellectual analysis. Here is my fist against the light casting a shadow on the table. The fist is the West and the shadow is the East. The fist is actuality—it has form and exists in space, while the shadow is shape, sometimes it has depth and it is diffused with mystery. I try to combine the two kinds of art that I have just mentioned, and to penetrate the meaning, the essence of whatever I’m doing by fully realizing the outer, material aspect.”

The still-life arrangements of the 1930s and the early 1940s are charged with hidden meaning and emotion. “If a man feels very deeply about war, or any sorrow or gladness, his feelings should be symbolized in his expression, no matter what medium he chooses. Let us say still life . . . you can use symbols to say clearly the sorrow or gladness felt deep in your heart.”

*Upside-Down Table and Mask* (1940) reflects Kuniyoshi’s reactions to a world at war. Kuniyoshi’s personal history is revealed symbolically in *Weather Vane and Sofa* (1933), painted after his appointment as instructor at the Art Students League. The sculpture mold, the folk art weathervane, the grapes and avocados (a reminder of his days picking fruit in Fresno), and the photograph, all recall his experiences as an artist in America. An assiduous collector, Kuniyoshi continued to incorporate Americana into his compositions, as well as objects which appealed to him for their shape, color, and texture. Inspired by Zen philosophy, he explained, “When I am thoroughly acquainted with these objects I fit them together to suit my feeling and construct material for a still life. I know exactly what it is all about, because I have felt it, because I love it, because I feel the shape and color.”

Kuniyoshi’s depictions of women continued throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Whether swathed in furs at a café or languidly posed in semi-undress, his models symbolize an ideal, “a woman to represent all women.” Although his still-life objects were painted with attention to their unique physical properties, it was a collective rather than an individual woman that Kuniyoshi sought to portray.



*The Fall of Man (Adam and Eve)*, 1922

Oil on canvas, 20 x 30

Private collection

“It seems of greater value to paint my conception of a woman; to express my inner feelings toward the object is more important than the physical aspects of any individual. . . . the importance and impact lie in grasping the content of the matter, the essence pulsating within itself. Instead of painting from the outside in, my efforts have been to concentrate on inside out.” *I’m Tired* (1938) typifies this intimate viewpoint. The model is at rest, leaning against an open copy of the *Daily News* with a crumpled pack of Camels littering the table. While artists such as Reginald Marsh used newspapers to inject social commentary, their headlines underscoring the intended message, Kuniyoshi was more oblique. As a subtle expression of his concern with world events, the presence of the newspaper adds realism to a private scene of female vulnerability. *I’m Tired* was chosen to represent Kuniyoshi’s work in a 1948 *Look* magazine article, a year after the journal’s indictment of “Advancing American Art.” But the pejorative criticism directed against *Circus Girl Resting* was superseded by praise for the more naturalistic treatment of a similar subject. *Look* polled art critics and museum directors for the ten most outstanding contemporary painters. Their choices—John Marin, Max Weber, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Stuart Davis, Ben Shahn, Edward Hopper, Charles Burchfield, Chaim Gross, and Franklin Watkins, with Lionel Feininger and Jack Levine tied for tenth place—were published under the heading “Are These Men the Best Painters in America Today?”

The introduction of newspapers into Kuniyoshi’s figure studies began a period of political awareness that deeply affected his work throughout the 1940s. While the subject matter of these paintings was mostly war related, the imagery grew increasingly enigmatic. His use of flat areas of shape and color—introducing a range of blues, oranges and golds—pointed to an evolving sense of abstract form and a return to Eastern principles of design. “The physical fact opens the door. Colors and shapes fuse into one, destroy, rebuild, destroy again. Paint the content. Paint inside-out. Under the surface—far away, yet very much in evidence—grow drama and mystery.”

Both *Deliverance* (1947) and *This Is My Playground* (1948) depict the war’s aftermath. In *Deliverance* the figures are set against a patchwork of juxtaposing color planes. Although a torn poster on

the left and a building in the distance ground the scene in reality, it retains the dreamlike quality of the early landscapes. Kuniyoshi’s interest in the Renaissance frescoes of Giotto, Piero della Francesca, and Uccello influenced his handling of paint and color. The grouping of the two central figures—the woman supporting a taller figure, hidden under the sacklike burden—also recalls the religious themes of the Italian masters. The title implies hope, but although supplies have come, a melancholy mood prevails. *This Is My Playground* is perhaps Kuniyoshi’s most abstract work, yet the message is clear and emotional. The little girl swinging in the ruins of a ravaged Western town recalls Ben Shahn’s postwar works, such as *Liberation* (1945), in both style and sentiment. Billboards and signs, also used by Kuniyoshi’s contemporaries, here take the form of a pointing hand, a target, and a rodeo sign in the foreground. For Kuniyoshi, these graphic symbols were memories of his arrival in the West. “When I first landed in Vancouver in 1906, it was a great sight. Even today I can picture the town very vividly. Everywhere were brick buildings and English writing on the walls of these buildings advertising all kinds of products. I was very enthusiastic seeing an altogether new kind of scene.” One of a series of deserted Western landscapes, *This Is My Playground* is a poignant postscript to his earlier experience.

*Oriental Presents* (1951), Kuniyoshi’s last still life, is a culmination of the aesthetic principles he had developed throughout his lifetime. The carefully composed arrangement and similarly hued color planes enhance the symbolic power of the work. All of the elements in this updated version of a tabletop still life are made of paper, fragile examples of Japanese art and craft. The print of the child surrounded by his parents in traditional kimonos, the boldly colored paper bird, and the graceful cardboard doll are flat objects in the shallow forward-tilted space so familiar in Kuniyoshi’s oeuvre. The torn red paper that winds its way among these souvenirs unifies the composition and heightens its abstract character.

In *Amazing Juggler*, painted the next year, Kuniyoshi further pursues his exploration of abstraction. Although the image of the juggler and the figures in the background are still totally recognizable, the upper half of the painting presents a dynamic interplay

between color, shape, and line. Suspended in mid-air, the juggler's balls operate as abstract elements, not unlike the decorative circles which often arch around a central object in folk art. The geometric structure in the upper right echoes other triangular forms—pointed hats, the forehead and long nose of the mask, the neckline of the costume, and the area formed by the arms of the clown in the upper left. The band of color that divides the background recalls similar devices used in both *Deliverance* and *Oriental Presents*. The shift in feeling from his ominous postwar scenes is heightened by the vivid colors of these circus themes.

Although Kuniyoshi continued to incorporate abstract elements into his compositions, he never abandoned the real forms that provided his inspiration. Sara Kuniyoshi recalls that in his final years he “said he would like to simplify his paintings so as to better express the essence of his ideas.” In his diaries, he criticizes abstract painters such as Marsden Hartley for finding emotional painting “distasteful” and for over intellectualizing their own work.

Kuniyoshi died in 1953, when Abstract Expressionism was dominating the American art world. While the Surrealist roots and highly emotive nature of this new movement paralleled Kuniyoshi's own concerns with dream imagery and emotion, he approached Abstract Expressionism with ambivalence. He regarded colleagues who changed styles overnight with disbelief, and felt that attention was often paid to a work simply because “the brightest pictures steal the show.” Kuniyoshi's orderly and disciplined nature and his lifelong involvement with Eastern aesthetics militated against such a radical change in his own work. Although the dominance of Abstract Expressionism during the following decade overshadowed Kuniyoshi and his generation of figurative painters, his influence has extended into the present. A copy of *Self-Portrait as a Golf Player* (1927) comprises half of David Salle's *View the Author Through Long Telescopes* (1981)—Salle's idea of telescoping Kuniyoshi into modern art. Salle describes his affinity to Kuniyoshi, and to this work in particular, as based on “the beautiful complexity of his Japanese identity played out through flirtation with modernism,” and his own “nostalgia for the way of being an artist that my teachers had.”

Regarded as humorous by most critics of the day, the importance of *Self-Portrait as a Golf Player* was noted in *The Arts*: “This Japanese conception of a golf course, a golf club and golf costume is a fair portrait of the painter and a fine big beautiful landscape but primarily it is a significant creation in design. The Far East is evident in confident calligraphy, the stylistic brush writing with heavier and lighter outlines and washes and the arbitrary color chord of ivory and ebony and lacquer red. Our western world has added plasticity and the vital something with which our best painters invoke the inner truth.” The exploitation of this duality has proved to be Yasuo Kuniyoshi's enduring legacy.

SUSAN LUBOWSKY  
*Branch Director*

\*This title is that of Kuniyoshi's autobiographical essay, *East to West*. Quotations from Kuniyoshi are taken from transcripts, letters, notes, diaries, and other documents in the collection of Sara Kuniyoshi or in the archives of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

# The War Years\*



*Untitled*, 1943

Pencil and crayon on paper, 16¾ x 13¾

Private collection

For Yasuo Kuniyoshi the Second World War was probably the most difficult time of his life. Although he had resided in the United States since 1906, American law made it impossible for him to become a citizen. He considered himself an American artist of Japanese origin, and his liberal, humanitarian ideals placed him in resolute opposition to the imperialist ambitions of his native country. Nevertheless, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, he was seen as an “enemy alien” by the American government. He sometimes found himself a victim of prejudice due to his prominence as a well-known artist, his appearance, and his affiliation with a country whose political goals he detested. Kuniyoshi was no passive victim; as an artist and a public figure he actively promoted the Allies’ cause. He was steadfast in his conviction that the war was one of ideologies, and that a democratic society was the only one that allowed an artist to be free. The art he made during the war years stands as a profound and heartfelt expression of the torments of a world at war.

Kuniyoshi was aware of prewar tensions very early. In 1931 he learned with dismay about Japan’s invasion of Manchuria. In 1935 he became a founding member of the American Artists’ Congress, whose motto was, “Against War and Fascism.” One of the most haunting of the over four hundred photographs he took and printed in the late 1930s was taken of a May Day parade outside his Union Square studio in 1937. It portrays two marchers wearing huge papier-mâché masks of Hitler and Mussolini; the monstrous heads confront an anonymous spectator, an image that reverberates with forebodings of the calamitous events to come.

At the time of Japan’s initial invasion of China, Kuniyoshi’s paintings were changing. He had left behind his lighthearted, folk-inspired style of the 1920s and was painting still lifes of great formal sophistication and iconographical complexity. After 1931 a new subject entered his work, as he repeatedly painted images of single, melancholy women. Often their pensiveness seems inspired by the newspapers included in the paintings. In a late example, *Season Ended* (1940–45), the brooding woman holds a paper with the word “Nazi” visible in the headline, and we can speculate that these women were alter egos for the artist, troubled by newspaper accounts of political developments in the 1930s.

Soon after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, in a letter to painter George Biddle, Kuniyoshi described his situation as “awkward and trying . . . a few short days have changed my status in this country although I myself have not changed at all.” His status had gone from “resident alien” to “enemy alien”: he was placed under house arrest, his funds were impounded, his cameras and binoculars confiscated, while friends and students wrote petitions to President Roosevelt protesting his loyalty. Soon Kuniyoshi was allowed to leave his house, and, unlike the more numerous Japanese on the West Coast, he was never put in an internment camp. He had to register with the government and carry an identity card; airplane travel was forbidden and he had to have government approval to go from one city to another. Kuniyoshi’s lawyer advised him to get statements of his loyalty from several prominent friends, which he immediately did. He also wrote to government agencies offering his services in the war effort. By the end of January he had agreed to write and record radio scripts for broadcast to Japan, and to do drawings for the newly created Office of Emergency Management.

According to his widow, Sara Kuniyoshi, he encountered anti-Japanese sentiment in his country residence, Woodstock, New York. His FBI file contains an abusive letter dated April 15, 1942, stating, “It is an offense to Woodstock country people that Kuniyoshi be given a voice on the air in our war effort. His reputation is unsavory here and I have even heard that several of the country men threaten to ‘tar and feather him’ if he comes back.” Undeterred, Kuniyoshi continued to teach summer school classes in Woodstock; the FBI interrogated him, searched his 14th Street premises, and subsequently cleared him of suspicion.

Soon after Pearl Harbor, Kuniyoshi wrote a letter to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. He had agreed to serve on a jury for its annual exhibition, but now, “under the circumstances” he offered to withdraw if they wished. When he received Academy Secretary Joseph Frazier’s matter-of-fact reply, telling him where and when to arrive in Philadelphia, he wrote back, “Your letter touched me terribly and made me very happy.” Two months later, in a radio speech broadcast to Japan titled “Japan Against Japan,” he cited this event as an example of the lack of prejudice against Japanese in the U.S. This was the second of his two broadcasts for



*Upside-Down Table and Mask*, 1940  
Oil on canvas, 60 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 35 $\frac{1}{2}$   
The Museum of Modern Art, New York;  
Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest



*This Is My Playground*, 1948  
Oil on canvas, 27 x 44½  
Dallas Museum of Art, Texas:  
Dallas Art Association Purchase

the American propaganda effort. He directed the speech to those in the arts and stressed that “the freedom of living and thinking enjoyed here . . . is a great contrast to the environment you endure under the militarists’ dictatorship in Japan.” He listed the many artists who had fled to the U.S. from the Nazis, “those masters of destruction and hate,” and he urged the Japanese artists into action: “Your class is small in numbers, but to preserve your own rights and beliefs and freedom of expression is your duty to the world.” He cited his own successes and honors as examples of the opportunities available to a Japanese artist in a free country. Though his appeal was sincere, it was also propaganda. In recounting his career he did not mention the “19 Americans” show at The Museum of Modern Art in 1929, when there was controversy in the press about the inclusion of Kuniyoshi, Lionel Feininger, and Jules Pascin because they were not American citizens; nor did he mention his dismissal from the WPA in 1937 for the same reason.

Along with his speeches, Kuniyoshi went into action, planning an exhibition of his works for the benefit of United China Relief in 1942. The show, held at the Downtown Gallery in New York, was a retrospective of the artist’s career, including a painting for each year from 1921 to 1942. Admission was 25 cents, and the artist donated a painting, valued at \$1500, to be raffled; all proceeds went to United China Relief.

With this exhibition and his work for the government, Kuniyoshi acted decisively at a time when the role of the artist during wartime was being much debated. On March 30, 1942 a group of artists met at his studio to discuss the issue. After the meeting, painter Stuart Davis sent Kuniyoshi a letter summarizing his view of the problem: “Propaganda and educational art are more the field of the cartoonist, the illustrator, the commercial artist . . . For those artists who believe that the social value of Fine Art did not automatically end as of December 7, 1941, the obligation to prove their case becomes an urgent objective.”

Kuniyoshi confronted this issue in a speech he called “Civilization Besieged: The Artists’ Role in War.” After confessing the difficulty of the question, he divided the artist’s role into two parts. The first was to make art that fills an important spiritual need for people. But

artists should realize that, beyond the positive nature of their work, they are individuals in a political system under attack: “Besides being artists, we are also part of the existing world. Not only do we have to continue our own work during this time but we must also help destroy the forces that are menacing its existence.”

In June 1942, Archibald MacLeish, author and Librarian of Congress then representing the Office of War Information, asked Kuniyoshi to make sketches for war posters. Although most of the approved themes were quite benign (“how the civilian can help through work and sacrifice”), he proposed that Kuniyoshi work on the theme, “The Issue: Why we fight, whom we fight, how we fight.” MacLeish explained, “We need to describe the enemy more fully, what his intentions are, how he looks. We suggest that you might care to work on the Japanese enemy.”

On September 2, Kuniyoshi sent his first poster sketches to the OWI—two images of a ferocious looking samurai general bristling with mask, sword, and medieval armor. Thomas Mabry, Assistant Chief of the Graphics Division, politely wrote the artist his criticisms: “I do not feel that they carry the journalistic impact that is necessary in our work. . . . I should appreciate very much your trying your hand at a poster on the recent Japanese atrocities. . . .” Mabry’s reply gave Kuniyoshi license to create the most violent images of his career and to unleash feelings that had been pent up during the nine months after Pearl Harbor. Nine days later he sent Mabry five new sketches, including a scene of rape and one of a baby being bayoneted. The savagery in the new drawings may have been encouraged by the work of George Grosz, who had left Germany in 1931 to teach, with Kuniyoshi, at the Art Students League.

One sketch is of the sprawling bodies of a dead couple; a Nazi, swastika on his armband, points a gun at the woman and smiles. In the others, the aggressors are grotesque Japanese soldiers, wearing modern uniform and carrying samurai swords. One extraordinary sketch, not submitted to the OWI, shows the soldier pulling a resisting woman, in a landscape populated by a pathetic dead cow and a pagoda. In a spontaneous gesture, Kuniyoshi tried to obliterate the soldier with an angry cascade of slashing pencil strokes.

Other sketches, featuring heroic bound prisoners and bestial Japanese torturers, illustrate the painful “water cure,” as well as scenes of rape and murder. The subjects were unusual for Kuniyoshi, but he drew them with his characteristic quirky, unpredictable line and soft modeling. There are no horizons in these scenes; the tormented figures float in a space without clearly defined perspective that calls to mind the artist’s affection for Parisian modernism, American folk art, and Japanese painting.

Mabry’s reaction to these works was enthusiastic. On September 19, he wrote about the “water cure” drawing, “Your sketch does a thousand times more than any atrocity photograph can do. . . . However, as you can guess, there are many points of view—very articulate too—which are dead against anything of the sort.” Kuniyoshi responded on September 22: “Your suggestions are very helpful. I, too, feel that although some people may not be quite ready for ‘atrocity’ posters, we will come to it sooner or later.” In fact, although the artist was paid for two drawings, *The Water Cure* and *Torture*, only his less gruesome *Torture* poster is known today. It represents a rear view of a man with hands shackled behind him. His muscular back bears the marks of cruel lashes. Because his face is hidden, he becomes the symbol of an unconquered prisoner; his twisting shoulders and squirming hands communicate his struggle for freedom. Kuniyoshi used his exquisite line, delicate modeling, and understanding of anatomy to make a powerful propaganda image.

In the early 1940s, Kuniyoshi did drawings for an OWI book called *This is Japan*; he was active in groups such as Japanese Americans for Democracy, and he continued making speeches for the war effort. Many American artists were anxious to show their support for the Allies, so The Metropolitan Museum of Art sponsored an exhibition of *Artists for Victory*, which opened on the first anniversary of Pearl Harbor. The show had over 1400 works, many by friends of Kuniyoshi, but he was not represented because only American citizens were eligible for inclusion.

The next month, however, he did participate in the 12th annual exhibition mounted by An American Group, Inc.—an organ-

ization of sixty-two prominent artists of which Kuniyoshi was president. In the exhibition called “Our Country’s Worth Fighting For,” he showed a desolate landscape painting entitled *Ghost Town*, his war poster, sketches, and photographs. Archibald MacLeish contributed a thoughtful essay to the catalogue, questioning how artists could be used in the war effort. Like Stuart Davis, in his letter to Kuniyoshi, he felt propaganda was better done by an illustrator or a commercial artist than by a painter. MacLeish concluded that the job for the creative artist “was the job of creating and contriving symbols which should make clear to the minds and the emotions what all men thought and felt but could not bring into the precision and the focus of an articulate symbol.”

Kuniyoshi’s paintings during the 1940s articulate many of the feelings of wartime without illustrating them. That he could also do political caricatures is seen in a photograph reproduced in a 1942 *Time* magazine. Taken at an Art Students League ball, it shows three painters next to their huge cartoons of Axis leaders—Jon Corbino with Mussolini, George Grosz with Hitler, and Kuniyoshi with Hirohito.

Sara Kuniyoshi remembers the artist telling her that it was not necessary to paint scenes of battle to communicate the sense of war. He said this regarding his 1940 still life, *Upside-Down Table and Mask*, a pre-Pearl Harbor painting that already suggested a world gone awry. His extended series of barren Southwestern landscapes, such as *Graveyard* (1941), *Nevadaville* (1942), and *Deserted Stone Quarry* (1943) convey a mood of ruin that he would carry into his postwar works. A similar melancholy is present in still lifes such as *Broken Objects* (1944) and *Rotting on the Shore* (1945). *Headless Horse Who Wants to Jump* (1945) is a morbidly surreal scene where a decapitated carousel horse, silhouetted against a torn replica of Kuniyoshi’s *Torture* poster, rears up in front of a lonely landscape. *My Man* (1943), a small casein, is slightly more hopeful, depicting an American sailor and his girlfriend on the boardwalk at Coney Island. The sailor, seen from the back, is a jaunty and confident counterpart to the figure in *Torture*, but his girlfriend clings to him with an expression of unexplained anxiety on her face.



*Untitled*, 1943

Pencil and crayon on paper. 16¾ x 13¾

Private collection

Although Kuniyoshi's art of the war years reverberates with sadness, by 1944 he was less anxious about his personal fate as an "enemy alien." He explained in a speech at City Center on the second anniversary of Pearl Harbor. "The blow struck by Japan upon this nation became a very personal one, as if I had stretched out my hand and committed the act myself. I know the sting of segregation and the look that condemns one as an enemy. But after the initial confusion and excitement had subsided a more lenient attitude evolved. Democracy has prevailed in this country despite global chaos." He also mentioned having been awarded the first prize at the Carnegie International that year: "To have received the prize at this crucial stage of the war seemed almost beyond belief. . . ."

In the same speech he described Pearl Harbor as one of the "few grave and solemn moments in one's life that one never forgets," and the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945 was a moment of similar seriousness. As his speeches made clear, Kuniyoshi had always sympathized with the Japanese people, whom he believed to be misled by their militaristic leaders. He immediately sent letters to the War Department asking to enlist so he could help the Japanese recover and learn about democracy. His idealistic requests were turned down, so the next year he organized a Harvest Festival Dance at Woodstock to benefit Japanese in American relocation camps. The event was a big success; with a slot machine, a cash bar, and auctions of photostats of Picasso's *Guernica*, as well as works donated by twenty-one artists, it raised \$1400.

Hiroshima and the end of hostilities inspired one of Kuniyoshi's most emotional paintings, *Mother and Daughter* (1945). The small canvas is painted with the resonant, somber colors of his early style. Set in a shallow space behind a ledge in the foreground, it represents a cathartic outburst of feeling as mother and child reunite. In contrast to the mother, bent with emotion, the daughter stands upright, face invisible. But the intensity of her feelings is evident from her hand fiercely clutching the curtain at the right, while her mother's anguished, ecstatic face expresses the relief of years of tension and sorrow suddenly expelled. Once again Kuniyoshi used women to articulate his feelings, and they continue to be

the protagonists in many of his paintings of the later 1940s, which reflect the aftermath of the war in their sense of loss. The title *She Walks Among the Ruins* (1945–47) communicates this mood, also found in many contemporary works. In *This Is My Playground* (1948) a desolate and irrational landscape is a playground for a young girl who swings from a window frame in a blasted building. At the left is what looks like a tattered Japanese flag impaled on a dead tree; its central red circle, symbolic of the rising sun, has turned black.

Kuniyoshi conducted himself with great dignity and integrity during the difficult war years, steadily working to further the cause of democracy. Beyond that, his paintings and drawings of the 1940s, perhaps more than those of any American painter, answered the challenge offered by Archibald MacLeish in his foreword to the 1942 "Our Country's Worth Fighting For" exhibition: "When people say, as they do by the thousands in the polls and the questionnaires, that they don't know what the war is about, they mean, not that they are in doubt as to their own actions and loyalties, but that they have no form of words, no tangible or sensuous symbol, in which their understanding can be expressed. The problem is, in other words, that ancient problem of the artist—the discovery of the image of his world."

T O M W O L F  
Bard College  
Annandale-on-Hudson

\*Kuniyoshi kept files of his documents from the war years, including drafts of his speeches and letters, and relevant correspondence from friends and the government. Some of these documents are on microfilm at the Archives of American Art; all the originals belong to Sara Kuniyoshi, who plans eventually to donate them to the Archives. She generously gave me access to these files, and they are the primary source of information for my essay.



*Mother and Daughter*, 1945 Oil on canvas, 40¼ x 30¼ Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh; Patrons Art Fund

# Checklist

*Dimensions are in inches, height preceding width, and refer to sheet size for drawings. An asterisk indicates that a work will be shown only at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris. An expanded selection of works will comprise the traveling exhibition.*

## PAINTINGS

*The Fall of Man (Adam and Eve)*, 1922  
Oil on canvas, 20 x 30  
Private collection

*Boy Stealing Fruit*, 1923  
Oil on canvas, 20 x 30  
Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio; Gift of Ferdinand Howald

*Child*, 1923  
Oil on canvas, 30 x 24  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;  
Gift of Mrs. Edith Gregor Halpert 55.1

*Landscape*, 1924  
Oil on canvas, 20 x 30  
Whitney Museum of American Art,  
New York; Purchase 31.271

\**The Swimmer*, 1924  
Oil on canvas, 20 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 30 $\frac{1}{8}$   
Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio; Gift of Ferdinand Howald

*Waitresses from Sparhawk*, 1924  
Oil on canvas, 29 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 41 $\frac{1}{2}$   
Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery,  
The University of Texas at Austin;  
James and Mari Michener Collection

*Circus Girl Resting*, 1925  
Oil on canvas, 39 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 23 $\frac{3}{4}$   
Auburn University Collection, Alabama

*Self-Portrait as a Golf Player*, 1927  
Oil on canvas, 50 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 40 $\frac{1}{4}$   
The Museum of Modern Art, New York;  
Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund

*Weather Vane and Sofa*, 1933  
Oil on canvas, 35 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 60 $\frac{1}{8}$   
The Santa Barbara Museum of Art,  
California; Gift of Wright S. Ludington

*I'm Tired*, 1938  
Oil on canvas, 40 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 31  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;  
Purchase 39.12

*Summer Storm*, 1938  
Oil on canvas, 26 x 38 $\frac{1}{4}$   
The Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan;  
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. George Kamperman

*Upside-Down Table and Mask*, 1940  
Oil on canvas, 60 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 35 $\frac{1}{2}$   
The Museum of Modern Art, New York;  
Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss  
Bequest

*Mother and Daughter*, 1945  
Oil on canvas, 40 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 30 $\frac{1}{4}$   
Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania;  
Patrons Art Fund

*Deliverance*, 1947  
Oil on canvas, 40 x 30  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;  
Purchase 48.7

*This Is My Playground*, 1948  
Oil on canvas, 27 x 44 $\frac{1}{2}$   
Dallas Museum of Art, Texas;  
Dallas Art Association Purchase

\**Forbidden Fruit*, 1950  
Oil on canvas, 32 x 50  
Syracuse University Art Collections,  
New York

*Oriental Presents*, 1951  
Oil on canvas, 30 x 50  
Private collection

*Amazing Juggler*, 1952  
Oil on canvas, 65 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 40 $\frac{1}{8}$   
Des Moines Art Center, Iowa;  
James D. Edmundson Fund

DRAWINGS

*Farmer's Daughter with Three Cows.* 1922

Ink on paper, 12¾ x 18¾

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;

Gift of Mrs. Edith Gregor Halpert 57.1

*Damp Place,* 1923

Ink on paper, 13¾ x 18¾ (sight)

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;

Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney

31.554

*Untitled,* 1943

Pencil and crayon on paper, 16¾ x 13¾

Private collection

*Untitled,* 1943

Pencil and crayon on paper, 16¾ x 13¾

Private collection

*Untitled,* 1943

Pencil and crayon on paper, 16¾ x 13¾

Private collection

*Untitled,* 1943

Pencil and crayon on paper, 16¾ x 13¾

Private collection



Yasuo Kuniyoshi, 1941

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at Philip Morris  
120 Park Avenue  
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